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ABSTRACT

The writing center at a Maryland university prepares third-year students for nonacademic, preprofessional writing by using retired professionals as tutors. These tutors are trained by discussing readings centered around the Aristotelean schema of ethos, logos, and pathos and the more recent conception of writing as a problem-solving process. The tutors establish a context for conversation on a one-to-one basis and, through questioning, try to enable the students to understand inductively the nature of the language they have reproduced. The tutors bring their experience in the "real" world--the nonacademic world--to bear on the students' writing. Through on-the-job experience, they have encountered nonacademic writing in its worst and best forms; thus they are able to refine the students' conception of audience and to counter stilted prose by pointing out jargon, awkwardness, and obfuscation. For the students, the tutors possess more authenticity, forcefulness, and objectivity. (HTH)

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Senior Citizens and Junior Writers--A Center for Exchange: Retired Professionals as Writing Laboratory Tutors for Students Enrolled in Upper-Level Pre-Professional University Writing Courses

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A retired librarian scrutinizes a grant proposal written by a dairy science student to implement an experimental milking system on his parents' farm in Western Maryland. A retired newspaper reporter queries a mechanical engineering student about the relative merits of heat pumps as alternate energy sources. A retired art critic helps a microbiology major to organize questions for her interview with a National Institute of Health research scientist. Such events occur daily in the Junior Writing Center at the University of Maryland. The required Junior Composition course places more sophisticated demands on students, and the Junior Writing Center meets those special needs with retired professionals as tutors.

Junior Composition attempts to prepare students for non-academic pre-professional writing. Students, having accumulated at least 56 credits, choose either English 391, "Advanced Composition," or English 393, "Technical Writing," to fulfill the requirement.[1] Non-academic writing intends more than proving the student's mastery of a given content area and is designed for an audience other than a teacher or an academic journal. Students write about information they themselves know and care about, information emerging from the study of their disciplines, their professional interests, and their career goals, information the teacher only incidentally already knows. The audience suggested is that of educated persons who are <u>not</u> experts in the student's field--much like the professional audience the student will later most often address.

Prior to the 1980-81 academic year, students chose between two established writing support systems, the Reading and Study Skills Laboratory and the Freshman Writing Center. Both--essential to students within the academic community--continue to offer writing support. Open to any student, the Reading and Study Skills Lab offers assistance, both individually and in groups, for a wide variety of academic skills, ranging from notetaking and time management to spelling, vocabulary, and grammar to reading and writing. Although R.S.S.L. supplies audio tapes and worksheets on these topics (and others), it also provides, by appointment on a limited basis, tutors--themselves teachers-- who can help students with specific problems. Primarily, the student writers electing to come to this laboratory (either by choice or by faculty referral) want to improve the academic writing produced for classes or to review grammar.

On the other hand, the less-diversified by intent, Freshman Writing Center helps mainly with writing, but focusses on enabling freshmen to pass the required grammar competency exam. Using little hardware, peer tutors assist English 101 students with their compositions and present workshops on topics such as the use of semi-colons and commas, capitalization, and subject-verb agreement. Through this Writing Center, then, the freshmen become grammatically competent and inculcate fundamental principles of the writing process. Limited funding, however, necessitates the Freshman Writing Center's serving primarily the 6000 English 101 students enrolled each year.

But the Junior Composition student requires a type of assistance different from either of these two groups. First, grammar competency is assumed, and teachers need little classroom time for grammar basics in the course. More importantly, though, the Junior Composition student attempts to transmit the technical information he knows to an audience who wants or needs that knowledge. And here is the crux, the knotty knot of Junior Composition: how to teach students to recognize and to produce clarity without condescension, precision without jargon, and voice without impersonality. Certainly, the teacher of Junior Composition aims at achieving this kind of writing. Our Writing Center, through its tutors' experience, offers a support system keyed to the aim of the course.

The staff of the Junior Writing Center consists of twelve tutors, and whoever they are, they are themselves; and while retired, they are certainly not retiring. Our staff of retired professionals in their mid- to late 60's have had careers as varied as librarian, newspaper reporter, economist, editor, professor, nutrition researcher, public television program producer, and linguist. In late August, under the auspices of the Retired Volunteer Service Corps (housed in the Dean for Undergraduate Studies office), we placed an announcement in the Washington Post describing the availability of tutoring positions for the coming semester. Our main criteria, we wrote, were that the applicant write and "enjoy working closely with people." During two intensive training sessions in late September, we trained those who responded by discussing

readings centered around the Aristotelean schema of ethos, logos, and pathos and the more modern conception of writing as a problem-solving process. We have continued to build on this base, throughout the year, by including our tutors in faculty development activities and by inviting instructors during staff meetings to address specific concerns.

The activities of the Junior Writing Center are rooted in the Platonic practice of dialectic: first our tutors establish a context for conversation on a one-to-one basis and then, through questioning, they try to enable the student to understand, inductively, the nature of the language he has produced. Since tutoring is encouraged at any stage of composition, the entire writing--from the birth of the idea to the delivery of the completed paper--can be processed through this kind of inquiry-based refining, a refining that transforms what Flower has called writer-based prose into strong reader-based prose.[2] Our tutors move the student writing toward readability, the communicative efficiency of prose, toward professionalism.[3]

To return to the implied questions in our title: What lets these retired professionals so precisely meet the needs of our students? And what do our tutors receive from the students?

Overwhelmingly, the tutors bring their experience in the "real" world, in the non-academic world, to bear on the students' writing. Through on-the-job experience, they have encountered non-academic writing in its worst and best forms. Their own conception of audience is

clear, and by providing a concrete, face-to-face academic audience for the students, they refine the students' own conception of audience. Additionally, the tutors' practical experience enables them to counter stilted prose by pointing out jargon, awkwardness, and obfuscation. Such practical experience also permits them to propose heuristics for discovering information. In the eyes of our students, our tutors possess more authenticity, forcefulness, and objectivity. The tutors, in sum, provide the students with a connection to the real world of professionalism: like effective writers, the tutors engage in communication that is transactional, moving its recipient beyond egocentricity and fostering the kind of social interaction that Piaget argues is important to all learning.[4]

What begins to get solved in the Junior Writing Center is what Zinsser regards as the problem of all writing: to find the real man or woman behind all of the tension inherent in recording words on paper. This personal transaction, according to Zinsser, is at the heart of good writing, from which emerges two overarching traits--humanity and warmth.[5] Through our tutors, students learn that effective professionals do not sound like institutions, and they begin to regard the simple style as the art that conceals art, worth all the hard work and hard thinking it requires.

But how do these students benefit our tutors? According to questionnaire responses, the tutors perceive their role as supplemental to the teacher, and that within the tutoring sessions, they reinforce

classroom learning. Nearly all of the tutors state that they themselves have learned more about writing, its difficulties, its pleasures, and its intricacies. As one tutor put it, " . . . it made me exercise my gray cells (slowly disappearing though they may be)." Ultimately, though, what motivates the tutors may be what motivates us all as teachers: not the personal gratification or the personal stimulation, but the desire to see the future better.

Within a course designed to help students move more effectively into the professional world, students need more than academic and peer feedback. The very presence of these tutors in our Writing Center assures our students of the course's context and aim. A writing course alone does not transform a student into a professional, but this Writing Center - like Junior Composition itself - eases the student toward professional stature.

Notes

[1]During the 1980-81 academic year, a total of 3273 students enrolled in the Junior Composition Program, forming 222 separate sections of approximately 15 students apiece.

[2]Flower, Linda. "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing." College English, 41 (1979), 19-37.

[3]Hirsch, E.D., Jr. The Philosophy of Composition (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1977), p. 74ff.

[4]Wadsworth, Barry J. Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development (New York: Longman, 1971), p. 30.

[5]Zinsser, William. On Writing Well, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 5.